

“Act of Violence – Act of Love” Transnational adoption in Austria

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This paper will explore the social practice and lived experience of adoptive families with Ethiopian-born children in Austria, and the role family narratives play in the construction of identity. It will focus on the question how these processes and practices are related to transparency in the adoptive process, and thus consequently complicate exclusive understandings of belonging and citizenship.

Transnational adoption creates kin relations across national and biological boundaries; it is a process that establishes bonds by law and nurture, not biology. In the adoptive process all connections to the child's birth country and family get legally cut. But a child differs from a file: the content of the latter can be deleted or changed, yet the child's legally deleted past remains relevant. The social practice of adoptive families is part of a transnational network of multiple flows in virtual and real space, as they are looking for their children's biological relatives, travel to the country of origin, use internet platforms to share information and experiences, and even incorporate the biological family into their network of kin.

There are major differences in families' everyday strategies and approaches to the past of the adoptive child, not only between individual Austrian adoptive families with children from Ethiopia, but especially between those who adopted in different countries. In Austria these different approaches are striking between families with children adopted in Ethiopia and South Africa, and are closely linked to transparency in the adoption process. As I will show in my paper, transnational practices are typical in Austrian families who adopted in Ethiopia, because they had to deal with a lack of transparency in the adoption process and alleged fraud by the adoption companies involved years after the adoption. I'll draw on my own ethnographic research in Austria, methodologically based on narrative- and problem-centered interviews and participant observation, as well as on other anthropological research on transnational adoption, kinship studies and citizenship.

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